

GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
Child and Family Services Agency



Testimony of

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before the Council of the District of Columbia

Committee on Human Services Public Hearing on Bill 18-667, "Families Together Amendment Act of 2010".

John A. Wilson Building, Room 123

Friday, March 19, 2010

Good morning, Chairman Wells and members of the Human Services Committee.

I am Debra Porchia-Usher, Deputy for Agency Programs at the District of Columbia Child and Family Services Agency. In my capacity as Deputy for Agency Programs, I am responsible for the Child Protective Services Administration and the Agency's in-home, foster care and permanency services. I am pleased to testify before you today on Bill 18-667, entitled the Families Together Amendment Act of 2010.

As you know, CFSA is a strong supporter of differential response and we are working toward its implementation. Later on, I will describe how we are engaging with our sister agencies to ensure that we are building a differential response system that is uniquely tailored to the needs of the District's children and families. Differential response is an approach that allows Child Protective Services (CPS) agencies to differentiate their response to accepted reports of child abuse and neglect. The selection for this pathway is based on such factors as the type and severity of the alleged

maltreatment, the number of previous reports, and the motivation and cooperation of the caregiver in addressing safety concerns.

Local jurisdictions throughout the United States are charged with the responsibility for responding to community concerns regarding abuse and neglect and ensuring the safety and well-being of children. Families that come into contact with the child welfare system often face numerous complex challenges with needs that cut across an array of issues such as domestic violence, mental health and economic concerns to name a few. Families that need assistance may face one of these issues but in some circumstances two or more. As the families we encounter face unique circumstances, it is important that the District responds to each family in a unique and tailored way.

During the past two decades, differential response systems have been implemented in more than two-dozen states across the country. Some jurisdictions are still in the early stages of implementation, with just a few pilot sites, while others are expanding or institutionalizing their systems statewide.

Through implementation of differential response, CFSA, other District agencies and community partners will seek to achieve improved safety of children; deeper engagements with families; increase family and employee satisfaction and establish a continuum of services that consists of government, community-based and neighborhood resources. In FY 2009, per the Agency's performance plan, CFSA developed a model of differential response which lays out the vision for the District's approach. In FY 2010, we are working with an interagency steering committee that has representation from Department of Human Services, the Department of Health Care Finance, the Department of Health, the Department of Mental Health, Department of Youth Rehabilitative

Services, Court Social Services, the Metropolitan Police Department, the Deputy Mayor for Education, and the Office of Victim Services. It is our goal to complete an implementation plan by the end of the fiscal year.

Passage of the Families Together Amendment Act will give CFSA the legal authority to conduct a traditional investigation or a family assessment depending on the severity of the allegations. For example, in all cases of severe abuse such as sexual abuse, a traditional investigation will take place. In low to moderate risk cases such as education neglect and inadequate housing cases, CFSA will conduct a family assessment concentrating on the supports and services the family needs.

As you know, every case of abuse and neglect is different. Providing flexibility in how we respond to these cases will allow us to work more effectively with families. Often times a traditional investigation route is not helpful in low to moderate risk cases. In an investigation, the focus is on gathering evidence, determining whether abuse or neglect occurred and who is responsible. In contrast, the family assessment focuses on the needs and strengths of the family. Participation in the process is completely voluntary. When there is no finding of abuse or neglect and the family does not have to worry about their names being placed in the Child Protection Register, they are more likely to cooperate with CFSA. This less adversarial family centered approach results in families being more engaged and actively participating in developing and following a service plan to address the safety and well-being of their families.

If at any time during the family assessment, CFSA suspects that severe abuse has occurred or the child is in imminent danger, the Agency can switch tracks and conduct a traditional investigation. CFSA's responsibility to remove a child when the child is in

imminent danger will not be compromised in the differential response system. CFSA may also decide during a traditional investigation that a family assessment may be more appropriate for the family, if the case presents less risk than initially believed.

CFSA strongly supports Families Together Amendment Act of 2010. We believe that the flexibility offered by this legislation will allow the Agency to better serve children and families in need without compromising safety. However, we would like to recommend the removal of the requirement to fully implement within 365 days of the laws' passage. While we are working diligently to develop an implementation plan for differential response, it is unclear if the resources necessary for implementation will be available in FY 2011. If the law was passed without this provision, CFSA would have the legal authority to implement differential response but would not be obligated to do so without adequate resources.

I appreciate your continuing partnership in providing the best protection and services possible to District children and youth in foster care. Thank you for this opportunity to provide input on this proposed legislation.